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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1581
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9542
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0622
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000039

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER MEET
KHALEDA ZIA REGARDING MILITARY COUP

REF: DHAKA 32

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a January 7 meeting the Ambassador and the BHC advised Khaleda Zia of approaches by some within the political parties advocating scenarios, backed by the military, to force Zia and Hasina into political exile. Although acknowledging some dissent within the party, Zia bristled at suggestions the military would take action against her or act extra-constitutionally. She accused the United States, United Kingdom and civil society of encouraging such speculation, an allegation which both the Ambassador and the British High Commissioner categorically denied. Zia rejected discussions with Hasina before elections and suggestions she make a bold political gesture of compromise. Instead, she reiterated the BNP position that elections must go forward but offered once returned to office to implement election reforms and hold new elections within 12-15 months. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Butenis and British High Commissioner (BHC) Anwar Chowdhury met with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia on January 7. At their request, Zia excused from the meeting her usual advisors (former Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, former Political Advisor Reaz Rahman and BNP General Secretary Mannan Bhuiyan.) They later returned for the discussion of election issues.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador and the BHC apprised Zia of approaches made to them by BNP and Awami League (AL) members advocating political scenarios, supposedly supported in parallel by factions within both parties, which include forcing Zia and arch-rival Awami League President Sheikh Hasina into exile abroad and possible military intervention, perhaps including martial law or a coup. (Note: the Ambassador and the BHC held a similar meeting with Hasina (reftel) on January 6. End note.)

¶4. (C) Zia bristled at suggestions the military would take any actions against her and accused the United States and United Kingdom, as well as prominent members of civil society, of supporting and encouraging such speculation. Although Zia acknowledged some within the BNP might be disgruntled, she dismissed them as malcontents who had not received seats on the party ticket. The Ambassador and BHC categorically stressed they did not support or encourage these proposals and had consistently opposed any

unconstitutional role for the military. To the contrary, they requested the private meeting with Zia because they felt obligated to bring these reports to her attention, noting that they delivered the same message to Hasina the previous day (January 6).

¶15. (C) The Ambassador and the BHC suggested that bold action was needed by the two leaders to break the impasse. Surely, they asked, a political compromise was possible that would spare the country from violence and end rumors and speculation about military intervention. "We are always ready to talk to the Awami League but they do not want to talk to us," she quickly replied. Zia argued that she always wanted the AL to participate in the elections, but it was now too late, holding to the BNP position that elections must take place as scheduled on January 22 to satisfy constitutional requirements. Once elected, the BNP would implement election reforms, including AL demands for voter ID cards, and would call for new elections within 12-15 months. Zia acknowledged many would not recognize the January 22 elections as credible, but said the government would be legitimate under the constitution.

¶16. (C) The Ambassador asked whether BNP would be able to govern and maintain law and order under this scenario, when nearly half the voters will believe they have been denied an opportunity to participate in a fair election. Zia scoffed at the idea that the AL might command support among even 40% of the population and does not believe the AL could sustain civil agitation.

¶17. (C) The Ambassador called Reaz Rahman on January 8 to reinforce the message to Zia that the parties need to find a

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mutually acceptable political solution. (Rahman, the articulate former Political Advisor to Zia and a former Foreign Secretary remains a close advisor to Zia.) Rahman was present during this part of the discussion.

¶18. (C) Rahman assured the Ambassador that Zia "got the message." Nonetheless, Zia and the BNP believe holding elections as scheduled is the least damaging of the options available, which include postponing elections ("unknown territory"), a State of Emergency (in which elections are cancelled), and military intervention.

¶19. (C) Comment: Zia reacted as anticipated, rejecting out of hand the suggestion that "her" army would be disloyal, though surprisingly admitting to some dissension in the BNP ranks. (We continue to hear various versions of possible military intervention, which will be reported septel.) People are afraid to give Zia bad news as her "shoot the messenger" response to the Ambassador's message indicates. We have been told that the BNP was taken aback by the negative reaction of the US and other countries to their one-sided election plan. Zia has reversed herself before on key points (Chief Justice Hassan as Chief Advisor, Chief Election Commissioner Aziz leaving the Election Commission, and Election Commissioner Zakaria also going on leave) once enough pressure has been applied from all sides. The critical element may be assurance to the BNP that the Awami League, this time, has a genuine bottom line and will be held to it. End comment.
BUTENIS